July 15, 2014
1420 East 6th Ave.
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620-0701

Environmental Quality Council
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fisheries Division
Endangered Species Coordinator
Native Species Coordinator - Fisheries
Missoula Office
Montana State Library, Helena
MT Environmental Information Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Wayne Hadley, 1016 Eastside Road, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
North Powell Conservation District, 1002 Hollenback Road, Suite C, Deer Lodge, MT 59722
Montana River Action, 304 N 18th Ave., Bozeman, MT 59715
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Helena
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena
State Historic Preservation Office, Helena
Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, P.O. Box 1, Ovando, MT 59854
Gary and Sharon Jacobson & Jon and Linda Ender, Hwy 200, Ovando, MT 59854

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Please find enclosed an Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The Program tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project that would upgrade an existing irrigation system to conserve an estimated 16 cubic feet per second (cfs) of streamflow through a dewatered section of the North Fork Blackfoot River. The intent of the project is to improve native trout stream habitat by enhancing instream flows during summer and fall months. The North Fork Blackfoot River is a tributary to the Blackfoot River located about 5 miles east of the town of Ovando in Powell County.

Please submit any comments that you have by 5:00 P.M., August 18, 2014 to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks at the address listed above. The funding for this project through the FFIP is contingent upon approval being granted by the Fish and Wildlife Commission. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at (406) 444-2432. Please note that this draft EA will be considered as final if no substantive comments are received by the deadline listed above.

Sincerely,

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
Habitat Bureau
Fisheries Division
e-mail: mmcgree@mt.gov

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
North Fork Blackfoot River Instream Flow Enhancement

General Purpose: The 1995 Montana Legislature enacted sections 87-1-272 through 273, MCA that direct Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to administer a Future Fisheries Improvement Program (FFIP). The program involves providing funding for physical projects to restore degraded fish habitat in rivers and lakes for the purpose of improving wild fisheries. The legislature established an earmarked funding account to help accomplish this goal. Additionally, the 1999 Montana Legislature amended statute sections 87-1-273, 15-38-202 and Section 5, Chapter 463, Laws of 1995 to create a bull trout and cutthroat trout enhancement program. This legislation was amended again in 2013 to open the program to all native fish species (statute section 87-1-283). The program now calls for the enhancement of native fish through habitat restoration, natural reproduction and reductions in species competition by way of the FFIP.

The FFIP is proposing to provide partial funding to a project calling for the upgrading of an existing point of diversion, which would enhance instream flows for native trout during the summer and fall months.

I. Location of Project:

The project site is located on the North Fork Blackfoot River, a tributary to the Blackfoot River, within Township 15 North, Range 11 West, Section 29 in Powell County, located about 5 miles east of the town of Ovando (Attachment 1).

II. Need for the Project:

FWP's six-year operations plan for the fisheries program includes the following goals:

- Restore and enhance degraded aquatic habitats.
- Protect, maintain, and restore native fish populations, their habitats, life cycles, and genetic diversity to ensure stewardship of native species and ensure angling opportunities whenever possible.

This project is expected to enhance aquatic habitat that has been impacted by dewatering and reduced stream flows. By upgrading the existing point of diversion, additional water will remain in the stream and improve the habitat of the North Fork Blackfoot River for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.

III. Scope of the Project:

The existing point of diversion currently is served by an infiltration gallery (fish screen), with flows proceeding through an open ditch to the landowners' properties. Synoptic flow measurements detected an approximate 90% loss in the existing ditch system. In this project, water will continue to flow through the gallery, but instead of a ditch will use a pipeline to deliver water, thereby reducing losses. Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) engineers completed a design analysis to verify pipe size and water flow. The landowners'

irrigation systems will be upgraded from inefficient flood irrigation to a central pivot and a traveling gun. Because of these increased efficiencies, only 2 cubic feet per second (cfs) of streamflow will need to be delivered to the landowners. Because 18 cfs were used with the old system, 16 cfs will be conserved, increasing instream flow and enhancing habitat in the summer and fall months.

The total estimated cost for this project is $222,509. Of this total, the FFIP would be contributing up to $35,000. The remaining funds will come from other sources and from in-kind services:

Contributor	In-kind services	In-kind cash
Gary & Sharon Jacobsen		$20,000
Jon & Linda Ender		$80,000
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service		$38,718.50
Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited	$5,190.00	$43,600.50
TOTAL = $187,509		

IV. Environmental Impact Checklist:

Please see attached checklist.

V. Explanation of Potential Impacts on the Physical Environment

1. Terrestrial and aquatic life habitats.

This project involves the upgrading of an existing irrigation system to conserve water and increase streamflow in the North Fork Blackfoot River. Long term, impacts to aquatic life include improved habitat for native bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout, and other resident fish species. Short term, construction impacts associated with the streambed and streambanks will be minimal, as the work would be completed off-channel, on the irrigation ditch and at the location of the upgraded landowner irrigation systems.

2. Water quantity, quality and distribution.

The streamflow in the project area of the North Fork Blackfoot River is expected to increase with this project. With the irrigation ditch renovations, 16 cfs will be conserved and remain in the river. Instead of 18 cfs being delivered to the irrigators, 2 cfs will be diverted due to reduced losses and increased efficiencies in irrigation methods. Because the work will not be done within the stream channel, short-term increases in turbidity are expected to be minimal. However, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality will be contacted to determine narrative conditions required to meet short-term water quality standards and protect aquatic biota (318 authorization).

4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality.

Removal of the irrigation canal and replacement with an irrigation pipe would

temporarily disturb the adjacent plant community. However, the productivity of adjacent land would not be affected, and the area would be revegetated with native species.

5. Aesthetics.

In the short term, aesthetics would be adversely impacted due to ground disturbance and the presence of heavy equipment during construction. Long term, the proposed project would and replace the open irrigation ditch with a closed pipeline, potentially making the location appear less obtrusive.

7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources.

Bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, both Species of Concern in Montana, are located within the area affected by this project. The North Fork Blackfoot River is the largest tributary to the Blackfoot River and supports the largest bull trout spawning population in the Blackfoot Basin. Additionally, the population of westslope cutthroat trout is robust in this vicinity. This stream has been designated critical bull trout habitat and a core bull trout area stream. By completing this project, native fish habitat in this vicinity will greatly improve.

9. Historical and archeological sites.

This project will involve land that has been previously disturbed and is currently being used for irrigation. No historical or archaeological sites have been identified. If cultural materials are inadvertently discovered during the project, the State Historic Preservation Office will be contacted, and the site will be investigated.

VI. Explanation of Impacts on the Human Environment.

4. Agricultural or industrial production.

The proposed irrigation renovations have been approved by the landowners. The amount of water required for proper irrigation would not be affected, as the new system will deliver adequate water for the landowners' needs while capitalizing on losses that will now be retained in the river. This project will not interfere with any water or property rights of adjacent landowners.

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities.

The project would potentially increase angling opportunities on-site. The North Fork Blackfoot River currently provides for local angling opportunities and enters a portion of the Blackfoot River that receives high angling pressure.

13. Locally adopted environmental plans and goals.

This proposed project is linked to a larger habitat conservation program that focuses on

critical bull trout habitat in the Blackfoot River drainage.

VII. Discussion and Evaluation of Reasonable Alternatives.

1. No Action Alternative

If no funding is provided through the FFIP, the applicant would have to either seek additional sources of funding to complete the project, the existing project would be partially completed, or the stream would remain dewatered. Without renovations to the irrigation systems, critical habitat for native trout would remain impaired due to reduced streamflow.

2. The Proposed Alternative

The proposed alternative intends to provide partial funding through the FFIP to upgrade an existing irrigation system and conserve an estimated 16 cfs to be used for instream flow and native fish habitat. With completion of this project, streamflows on this section of the North Fork Blackfoot River would be improved during the summer and fall months. The spawning, rearing, and movement of wild trout would be improved, potentially increasing recruitment and survival.

VIII. Environmental Assessment Conclusion Section

1. Is an EIS required? No.

We conclude, from this review, that the proposed activities will have an overall positive impact on the physical and human environment, and will therefore not require the extensive analysis associated with an EIS.

2. Level of public involvement.

The project application to the FFIP has been posted on the FWP webpage for public comment. No comments have been received to date. The proposed project was reviewed and supported by the public review panel of the FFIP. The proposed project also will be reviewed by the Fish and Wildlife Commission, and funding will be contingent upon their approval. The EA will be distributed to all individuals and groups listed on the cover letter and will be published on the FWP webpage: **www.fwp.mt.gov**

3. Duration of comment period?

Public comment will be accepted through 5:00 PM on August 18, 2014.

4. Person responsible for preparing the EA.

Michelle McGree, Program Officer
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Fisheries Division
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
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MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
1420 E 6th Ave, PO BOX 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701
(406) 444-2432

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Project Title: North Fork Blackfoot River Instream Flow Enhancement
Division/Bureau: Fisheries Division / Habitat Bureau (FFIP)
Description of Project: The FFIP tentatively plans to provide partial funding to a project that would upgrade an existing irrigation system to conserve an estimated 16 cfs of streamflow through a dewatered section of the North Fork Blackfoot River. The intent of the project is to improve native trout stream habitat by enhancing instream flows during summer and fall months. The North Fork Blackfoot River is a tributary to the Blackfoot River located about 5 miles east of the town of Ovando in Powell County.

POTENTIAL IMPACTS TO THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Terrestrial & aquatic life and habitats			X			X
2. Water quality, quantity & distribution			X			X
3. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture				X		
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality			X			X
5. Aesthetics			X			X
6. Air quality				X		
7. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources			X			X
8. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				X		
9. Historical & archaeological sites			X			X

POTENTIAL IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

	MAJOR	MODERATE	MINOR	NONE	UNKNOWN	COMMENTS ON ATTACHED PAGES
1. Social structures & mores				X		
2. Cultural uniqueness & diversity				X		
3. Local & state tax base & tax revenue				X		
4. Agricultural or industrial production			X			X
5. Human health				X		
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				X		
7. Access to & quality of recreational and wilderness activities			X			X
8. Quantity & distribution of employment				X		
9. Distribution & density of population & housing				X		
10. Demands for government services				X		
11. Industrial & commercial activity				X		
12. Demands for energy				X		
13. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals			X			X
14. Transportation networks & traffic flows				X		

Other groups or agencies contacted or which may have overlapping jurisdiction: North Powell Conservation District, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Army Corps of Engineers, Montana Department of Environmental Quality, State Historic Preservation Office

Individuals or groups contributing to this EA Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Recommendation concerning preparation of EIS No EIS required.

EA prepared by: Michelle McGree

Date: July 15, 2014

ATTACHMENT 1